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Summary record of the 8th meeting
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Chairman: Mr. MacKay ..... (New Zealand)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Kuznetsov

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Agenda item 112: Pattern of conferences (*continued*)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Agenda item 112: Pattern of conferences (*continued*) (A/58/435 and Add.1 and A/58/620; A/59/32, A/59/133 and Corr.1, A/59/159 and Add.1, A/59/172 and A/59/418)

1. **Mr. Olago Owuor** (Kenya), speaking on behalf of the African Group, said that the Group wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Qatar on behalf of the Group of 77 and China at the Committee's previous meeting. It noted with appreciation that there had been steady progress and improvement in the utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON) since the establishment of a permanent interpretation service in 2001. However, greater effort was needed to market those facilities to a wider clientele. It noted in that connection the marketing campaign being conducted to increase utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). In accordance with the headquarters rule, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) should hold all their meetings and events at UNON. The Secretary-General's commendable efforts to increase utilization of the conference centre at ECA should be pursued. In addition, the centre should establish and develop linkages with other United Nations conference centres and bodies and introduce an integrated conference management system and other modern technologies for more efficient delivery of services.

2. The Group noted with concern the high vacancy rates in the translation and interpretation services in Nairobi, which stood at 25 and 26.3 per cent respectively, compared with only 7.79 and 3.65 per cent at the United Nations Office at Geneva. It also noted the chronic difficulty in staffing the UNON Arabic Interpretation Unit. A long-term strategy should be developed to address the persistent problem of vacancies in Nairobi, which had not received the attention it deserved. The Group trusted that the Secretary-General would present such a proposal at the current session.

3. With regard to the calendar of conferences and meetings, the Group noted the overlap in April 2005 between the sessions of the Governing Council of UN-Habitat and the Commission on Sustainable Development. Such overlaps should be avoided in future as they presented difficulties for small delegations from developing countries. The Group noted with concern that some requests for provision of interpretation services to regional and other major groupings of Member States had not been met, notwithstanding the General Assembly's decision to include all necessary resources for that purpose in the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005. It also regretted that no interpretation services had been provided for the portion of the 459th meeting of the Committee on Conferences conducted via videoconference, in which representatives of the conference-servicing units at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna had participated. As a result, some delegations had been unable to follow the deliberations.

4. The Group expected the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM) to yield high-quality, cost-effective performance and improvements in efficiency and productivity. It welcomed the development of integrated global management of conference services and the active participation of UNON in that process. It also appreciated the efforts made to include UNON in the sharing of standards, good practices and technological advances with other duty stations, although it would like to see a more integrated approach in that area.

5. **Ms. Chen** (Canada), speaking also on behalf of Australia and New Zealand, emphasized the three delegations' strong support for the continued reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. They noted the efforts made in the area of results-based management and the progress achieved towards greater cost-effectiveness and efficiency and the establishment of an integrated global management system. The adoption of a collaborative planning approach among duty stations, while welcome, did not diminish the overall authority of the Under-Secretary-General, who remained accountable for all relevant resources. The integration of information technology in the workplace was not proceeding as rapidly as had been forecast. In that connection, the three delegations looked forward to the early completion of the transition to electronic workflow in all duty stations, which would require concrete targets and strong leadership and vision from the Department's management. Quantitative measures of productivity, efficiency and

cost-effectiveness were essential management tools. The lack of progress in developing means to measure productivity and efficiency was therefore puzzling. Lastly, the three delegations wished to propose the biennialization of the item on pattern of conferences, which, though important, did not require annual treatment.

6. **Mr. Berti Oliva** (Cuba) said that the proper conduct of the intergovernmental legislative process depended heavily on effective and efficient conference services and the goal of reforming the Department should be to provide such services.

7. While it acknowledged the efforts of the Department to fulfil its role of providing effective support for the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly, the report of the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/59/172) had made certain value judgements in connection with the sensitive and sometimes controversial discussions on the revitalization of the General Assembly. It regarded the report's discussion of issues such as "reform of the working methods of the Main Committees" as inappropriate, as they were a matter for the Member States alone.

8. His delegation hoped that the Electronic Meetings Planning and Resource Allocation System (e-Meets) would improve the Secretariat's ability to respond to requests from Member States. An in-depth analysis of the chronic problem of documentation should be conducted and Member States must retain the right to request whatever reports they deemed necessary to the legislative process and to request that their communications, of whatever length, should be distributed as official documents. While it could not agree to decisions which, out of supposed budgetary concerns, violated the rights and prerogatives of Member States, it was prepared to consider any proposals that might improve the provision of documents.

9. Given the crisis experienced by the Fifth Committee at the current session, his delegation questioned the conclusion in paragraph 28 of the report of the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department (A/59/172) that there had been "a trend of improvement in the timely issuance of documents". It would also like clarification of the statistics presented in that paragraph. Though it was not opposed to changing the current standard, it wondered why the Secretariat had used the four-week rather than the six-week rule to measure timely issuance during the Assembly's fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions and which bodies had been most affected by delays in the issuance of documents.

10. With regard to printing on demand (PoD) and the possible savings generated, his delegation recalled the unequivocal view of the General Assembly that that method should affect neither the quality of services to Member States nor the number of documents that delegations were able to request. Furthermore, while paragraph 35 of the Secretary-General's report indicated that the tangible benefits included the reduction of 13 staff members, Part I, Section 2, of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 (A/58/6, Sect. 2, para. 2.12 (g)) had indicated restructuring of the text-processing area with the abolition of 7 posts and the redeployment of another 19 posts to other priority areas in the Department. He wondered why the figures differed and what basis had been used to calculate savings, particularly in staff costs.

11. He also wished to know the cause and average length of the obvious time lag between the availability of a document in electronic form and its availability in printed form. The Secretariat seemed to be giving precedence to the electronic versions of documents, thus violating the relevant decisions of the General Assembly.

12. **Ms. Kane** (Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management) expressed gratitude for delegations' support for the Department's efforts. With regard to the slotting system, the aim of introducing any innovation was to serve Member States better. However, given the Department's short experience with the system, there had been some teething problems not only in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management but also in author departments and discipline was required on all sides. It was illogical to blame the slotting system per se for the late issuance of documentation. It allowed greater flexibility than the 10-week rule for the timely submission of documentation, although that rule remained in force and should be adhered to where possible. Documents submitted late could be turned around more quickly, but higher costs were incurred. The purpose of the

slotting system was precisely to avoid the large overruns of the past by ensuring greater predictability.

13. A number of delegations had referred to the report of the Board of Auditors to the Security Council on the financial statements of the United Nations Compensation Commission for the biennium ended 31 December 2003 (S/2004/789). That document had been submitted to the Department on 5 October 2004 for issuance on 11 October 2004, which was a very tight turnaround time. It was one of a series of reports requested from the Board in connection with the investigation of the oil-for-food programme. Owing to the length of those reports and the short issuance deadlines, the Department had been instructed to offset the attachments in the language of submission. For that reason, the annexes to document S/2004/789 had been issued in English only.

14. The provision of interpretation services to regional and other major groupings of Member States had been analysed in the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/57/228). The conclusion had been reached that earmarked resources would be required in the programme budget in order to provide those services on a more predictable basis. Currently, those services were provided on an ad hoc basis from within existing resources. The percentage of requests for interpretation met had declined from 98 per cent two years earlier to 90 per cent in the period under review. However, under the current circumstances, 90 per cent could be seen as the norm for New York. Moreover, the number of meetings provided with interpretation had actually increased by 10 per cent each year over the previous three years. In order to ensure uniformity of practice, the Department had established a task force on meetings planning that would review procedures at each duty station and make proposals on ways and means of improving the provision of services.

15. The Department shared delegations' concern about the funding of posts at UNON through a combination of regular budget and extrabudgetary allocations. While all 20 posts in the interpretation service were funded from the regular budget, 35 out of 47 posts in the translation service were extrabudgetary and offered no career prospects. That situation not only made it difficult to attract qualified candidates, but was also unfair, since it created two classes of staff. She understood that UNON intended to address the problem in the next budget cycle. However, conversion of posts would be staggered.

16. The vacancy rate in interpretation would be reduced substantially as new competitive examinations were held. The problem was most acute in the Arabic booth. A competitive examination had already been held and the successful candidates would be interviewed shortly. The Office of Human Resource Management would then begin the recruitment procedure with the interpretation service in Nairobi being given priority. The high vacancy rate in translation was mostly due to the large number of retirements in recent years. While the Department had planned for the succession, including by holding more frequent competitive examinations for translators, the magnitude of the situation was unprecedented. Another factor in the high vacancy rate was mobility, which the Department encouraged.

17. In response to the request made by the General Assembly in section II.B, paragraph 9, of its resolution 58/250, the Department had proposed five options to make the provision of summary records more efficient and cost-effective. Those options were outlined in the report of the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/59/172, paras. 59-63). At the substantive session of the Committee on Conferences in September 2004, Member States had expressed interest in the option of concentrating précis-writing in the English Translation Service, which could be combined with the option of restricting the length of summary records. In addition, the option of replacing summary records with digital recordings had found support among some delegations in both the Committee on Conferences and the Fifth Committee. If Member States so requested, the Secretariat would study the practical and financial implications of the first option and present a pilot project to the Assembly at its sixtieth session. It would also examine the possibility of setting a time frame for the publication of summary records.

18. The utility of summary records had been the subject of considerable debate. However, the issue was for Member States themselves to decide. Likewise, the intergovernmental bodies entitled to summary records must themselves determine whether they wished to renounce their entitlements. While the drafting of summary records in the original language was generally completed within a few days of the meeting,

translation into the other five official languages lagged owing to the pressure of higher priority parliamentary documentation. In order to issue summary records in a more timely fashion, it would be necessary to reinforce the staffing of the translation services or provide additional resources for contractual translation of summary records, particularly in the light of the recent increase in the number of meetings, which had led to a commensurate rise in the requirement for summary records, without a corresponding increase in resources. Alternatively, the General Assembly might wish to conduct a thorough cost-benefit study of summary records and review the list of bodies entitled to them. Pending the completion of such a study, the Department had decided not to request any special provision for summary records in the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 but to do its best to expedite their delivery within existing resources.

19. The informational meetings to brief Member States on the terminology used and to consult with them on the improvement of the language services would be held twice a year for each language rather than once a year. The Department also planned to set up a web site to receive comments on an ongoing basis. Pending the establishment of the web site, it would appreciate receiving feedback from delegations via e-Meets. Meeting-related information was currently posted on electronic bulletin boards according to the chronological order in which meetings would take place. When more than one meeting was scheduled to take place at the same time, the information was posted according to the hierarchical order of the bodies concerned. That arrangement had been deemed the most practical. However, if Member States so requested, the Department would be willing to adopt hierarchical order as the first criterion, following the practice of the Journal of the United Nations. Lastly, there were different levels of access to the Official Documents System (ODS). When free, public access to ODS was implemented, only documents for general distribution would be freely available. Access to conference room papers, for example, would require a password.

20. **Ms. Goicoches** (Cuba), while welcoming the information provided by the Assistant Secretary-General, said that her delegation's questions had not been answered and recalled its position that questions posed in a formal meeting of the Committee must be answered at a formal meeting.

21. **Mr. Elji** (Syrian Arab Republic) referred to the issuance of an addendum to a document in English only, even though addendums were considered to be part of an official document, and reiterated that official documents must be issued in all official languages. With regard to summary records, he had noted the absence of a request for resources to be allocated for that purpose in the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005. However, in its resolution 58/250, the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to take action to ensure the timely issuance of summary records and the mandates for that purpose were contained in the medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005 and the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005. In his view, the budget must therefore make provision for timely issuance of summary records. He looked forward to receiving a written response to his questions.

22. **Mr. Olago Owuor** (Kenya) said that his delegation would like a written transcript of the Assistant Secretary-General's responses.

23. **Ms. Udo** (Nigeria) echoed the request of the representative of Kenya for a transcript of the Assistant Secretary-General's responses and wondered why, if there had been an increase in the demand for summary records, that increase had not been reflected in the programme budget.

24. **The Chairman** said that a transcript would be provided as requested. He would take up with the Bureau the matter of scheduling a further meeting to provide the information requested by delegations.

25. **Ms. Kane** (Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management) said that although the number of bodies entitled to summary records had not increased, they held more frequent meetings and therefore required more summary records. The Department had not requested additional resources because the matter had already been taken up in the report of the Secretary-General on improving the performance of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services (A/57/289). At that time, the Department had suggested to the General Assembly that a cost-benefit analysis of providing summary records should be performed. Pending its outcome, the Department had operated, and would continue to operate, within the parameters of the current budget.

26. As an initial response to the questions of the representative of Cuba, she said that the six-week rule for the submission of documents remained in force, but that the Department had adopted a four-week rule as a strictly temporary internal measure which would be re-examined in the light of experience. The Department would provide more complete information when the Committee allocated more meeting time to the matter.

27. **Mr. Ouédraogo** (Joint Inspection Unit) said that paragraph 37 of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, entitled "From the Optical Disk System to the Official Documents System (ODS): status of implementation and evaluation" (A/58/435), contained a graph describing the seven levels of access to ODS. Levels 1 to 4 allowed access to derestricted documents, documents for general distribution, documents in limited copies and provisional documents. Since public access would extend only up to level 4, users needing access to certain documents, such as conference room papers, which were found in level 5, would encounter difficulties. For that reason, recommendation 7 (d) of the report had proposed requesting the Secretary-General to review access policy for those documents, particularly those connected with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Paragraph 36 of the report had pointed out that even if the General Assembly endorsed free access, registration would still be required for some users, owing to the fact that ODS was not only a repository of public documents but also had in storage restricted documents access to which would continue to be password-protected.

28. **Mr. Olago Owuor** (Kenya) said that he appreciated the efforts of the Bureau to leave more meeting time for the agenda item under discussion and that he would appreciate an answer to his earlier question on how the April 2005 scheduling conflict between the meetings of UN-Habitat and the Commission on Sustainable Development would be resolved.

29. **Mr. Elji** (Syrian Arab Republic) welcomed the clarification provided by the representative of the Joint Inspection Unit. For its part, the Secretariat should provide full details of the arrangements for access to ODS in the event that free access was established and the classification of documents in the System was reviewed.

The meeting rose at 11.25 a.m.